

Language and Art in Senegal: The Crossbreeding of Identities in Music

Dr. Ibrahima Sarr

Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis

ABSTRACT

Senegal is a melting pot of several civilizations mainly originated from the West (Europe) and the East (the Arab world). Assuming that language and culture are intrinsically related, the settlement of those people and their status as dominant minority sparked and strengthened the use of their languages in formal domains. In the long run, as they became domesticated, thus now considered African languages because they have contributed to mold the cultural identity of younger generation, they involve in all linguistic interaction. Arab, in its classical form, remains a symbol of Islam which earns it a certain degree of sacredness. Nevertheless the contact situation with the other languages forced it to crossbreed in special ways like borrowings and interferences. As for the other foreign languages, namely French, English, Spanish, and German at a least extent, they are made to carry the weight of local cultures.

Key words: language – art – identity – hybridity - Senegal

Résumé

Le Sénégal est au carrefour de plusieurs civilisations d'origine occidentale (Europe) et orientale (le monde arabe). Considérant que la langue et la culture sont imbriquées, le séjour des ces communautés ainsi que leur statut de minorité dominante donne suite et renforce l'usage de leur langues dans les contextes formels. A la longue, avec le processus d'appropriation et de domestication, ces langues et les univers culturels qu'elles représentent contribue à raffiner l'identité culturelle des jeunes générations. L'arabe, dans sa forme classique, demeure le symbole de l'islam mais il s'invite dans ce croisement sous des formes de communication comme l'alternance de codes, l'emprunt lexical et l'interférence linguistique. Pour ce qui concerne le français, l'anglais, l'espagnol et l'allemand dans une moindre mesure, elles sont le véhicule des cultures indigènes.

Mot clés : Langue – art – identité – hybridité - Sénégal

INTRODUCTION

Senegal is often called the « gate of Africa » as Ethiopia is the « horn of Africa ». This is because as the tip of Africa along the West Coast, Senegal is a landing point for many Western nationalities, the Portuguese, the English, the French, the Spanish, etc. Another feature of the Senegalese sociolinguistic environment points to the complexity of linguistic communities which overlap and create multiple identities valued at varying degrees and in different contexts. This is further accentuated by the development of new technologies of information and communication which open new contact areas beyond geographical proximity (virtual), showing up new rôle models

both in terms of cultural standards and linguistic norms. In this era of heterogeneity, identity is no longer an eternal criterion that can't be conceived outside one's ethnic language and culture. It becomes as dynamic as the social relationships that foster it.

Whatever the complexity of the subject matter, speakers handle it with such ingenuity in linguistically and culturally complex combination; the understanding of which requires competences combining multilingual and multicultural approaches and beyond that, solid knowledge of the *in vivo* status of languages and other disciplines related to the study of meaning.

Art in general is a domain of creativity. As part of their identity, artists seek beauty beyond the pragmatic dimension of their creation and rap music provides a perfect example of that fact. The aim of this paper is to investigate the mechanics of encoding the message conveyed in rap music songs with particular reference to the Senegalese sociocultural setting. It addresses specific issues as the interactions within the Senegalese linguistic and sociocultural environments, the advent of rap music in Senegal, its domestication and its evolution, last but not the least, language and identity in rap music. The sociolinguistic analysis of a selected sample lyrics has enabled us to demonstrate that in rap music, song writers operate in a way to display their multilingual repertoire, which in turn provides a reflection of crossbred identities. These identities exactly fit together in so far as the resulting perfectly match the so called urban culture.

Tongue induced by cultural, geographic, social, ideological and political mutations. As such, switching sometimes appears to be a compensatory strategy.

As for language use in rap music, it has been Mamadou Drame's focus in a paper devoted to the linguistic and sociolinguistic analysis of argot language in rap songs in Senegal¹. According to him, language in rap music can be called an argot because one of its purposes is being partially unintelligible to everybody. He also dealt with language switching and lexical innovation as one of the main linguistic features of rap songs. As far as identity is concerned, he stressed a turning in on oneself and compared it with the Negritude Movement of the 1900's with specific reference to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)². Under that consideration, rap music appears to be a protest movement addressing several issues among which identity. Yet, though the quest for racial integration is no longer a topical issue today, identity being in perpetual change, the theme is still on the agenda with new concerns and new perspectives that can be grasped through artistic expressions as music. Rap music is a tree in blossom in several parts of Africa with more or less the same sociocultural and political concerns. This is why Michelle Auzanneau focused on it in the Gabonese context³. One of the points he addressed is the issue of language use which showed out phenomena of language switching and mixing. Similar works were conducted elsewhere in the continent,⁴ still using town as an area of investigation.

¹ Mamadou Dramé. « Analyse linguistique et sociolinguistique de l'argot contenu dans les textes de rap au Sénégal » 2010.

² This movement was created by William Dubois and Booket T. Washington in Harlem.

³ Michelle Auzanneau. « Le rap à Libreville : aspects sociolinguistiques ». 2002.

⁴ Boumdini Belkacem identified, and analysed categories of loan words in rap music in Algeria (2009).

The last work we review in this paper is that of Boumedini Belkacem who focused on the categories of loan words in rap music in Algeria. Belkacem thus makes an inventory of loan words drawn from rap songs originating from French and makes also a phonological and morphological analysis of those borrowings to assess the process of their integration in the matrix language.

One cannot study language use in art without stepping back to some sociolinguistic theories such as diglossia, language contact and the issue of identity. In language contact situation (whether in geographical contiguity or in virtual contact), language barriers almost vanish, allowing greater interactions from which all sorts of influence derive. Language contact is thus a prerequisite for linguistic phenomena as code switching and code mixing. This is why language contact has become one of the hottest issues in sociolinguistic studies. This is also what led Robert Nicolai to state the following:

*Backing on the implications of recent works on linguistic changes sparked by language contact, I want to propose a theoretical approach positing that interlanguage contact is inherent to language use and monolingualism is rather an exception while multilingualism has become the general rule.*⁵

Indeed, when two people cohabit, they maintain relationships which nature reflects through their language use. The prestige associated with each language guarantees its expansion and the popularization of the culture of its people. The most prestigious ones are thus seen as models to adopt. This situation termed diglossia permits some languages to play greater roles in society while others are confined to intragroup interactions. Language is thus an identity marker that nonnative speakers can embody through its use. Language contact also favors bilingualism given that speakers are exposed to several languages or language varieties. Bilingualism sparks linguistic phenomena as code switching and lexical borrowing. As G. Tucker Childs puts it, « Undoubtedly borrowing correlates directly with the extent of bilingualism and the closeness of the contact between the languages »⁶. This view is further supported by Einar Haugen according to whom « For any large-scale borrowing a considerable group of bilinguals has to be assumed. The analysis of borrowing must therefore begin with an analysis of the behavior of bilingual speakers.⁷ » As stated earlier, Senegal is a multilingual country with about 25 local languages. This linguistic situation is made more complex by the introduction of foreign languages as French (through colonisation first, then as a political choice aimed at maintaining social cohesion while favouring international communication), English (the first language of the world taught at school as a foreign language from secondary school to university) and Arabic (brought by Islam and now the medium of instruction in Arabic schools and the major language is religious affairs). There are also other foreign languages with minor roles as Russian, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese. All these

⁵ R[obert] Nicolai. « Contact et génèse : ouvertures et perspectives pour un « nouveau programme » de recherche sur l'évolution des langues » In *XVIIe International Congress of Linguists*. Praha. http://www.unice.fr/ChaireIUF-Nicolai/TextesRN/CIL17%20RNicolai_%20fin.pdf p.2.

⁶ G. Tucker Childs. «Borrowing Into Kisi as Evidence of Mande Expansionism and Influence » p.82.

[Indéniablement, l'emprunt est directement lié au degré de bilinguisme et à la solidité des contacts entre les langues].

⁷ EINAR HAUGEN. "THE ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC BORROWING" IN *LANGUAGE*, VOL. 26, NO. 2. <http://www.linguisticsociety.org>. APR.-JUN. 1950, P.210.

[A LA BASE DE TOUTE SITUATION D'EMPRUNT MASSIF SE TROUVE UN IMPORTANT GROUPE DE LOCUTEURS BILINGUES. L'ANALYSE DE L'EMPRUNT DOIT, DE CE FAIT, COMMENCER PAR L'ÉTUDE DES COMPORTEMENTS DES LOCUTEURS BILINGUES.]

languages interact in everyday communication depending on speakers' needs and the richness of their linguistic repertoire. In such a context, some sociolinguistic assumption are broken; for example when they posit that in contact situation there is a unidirectional influence i.e. from majority languages to minority ones. Such a theoretical deconstruction is supported by Zachée Denis Bitjaa Kody⁸ when he speaks of majority borrowing and minority borrowing. In this context, the domestication of foreign languages and the Francisation, Englishisation of local languages has become an ordinary fact and the identity of speakers is to be sought as a blending of this complexity.

One Senegalese researcher, author of a new transcription system called ASA⁹ alphabet, says that the specific feature of his alphabet is that it uses consonant letters of Latin alphabet, vowel letters of Arabic, and diacritical marks of African languages to create a mix because he believes that the African identity in this 21st century is fundamentally a blend of Western, Arabic and African civilization.

The completion of this paper has necessitated a fieldwork based on an interview aimed at collecting empirical data that we subjected to a qualitative analysis. The fieldwork was conducted in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal, the most populated Senegalese town (nearly 1/3 of the country's population) and a cosmopolitan area where people from all linguistic and cultural backgrounds swarm in seeking new opportunities. It is said that there are more than 2000 rap crews in Senegal, most of whom obviously dwell in Dakar which is swarming with night clubs, cultural centres, community art centres, record companies, press houses, and million fans. So, Dakar is the ideal place for a rap singer who is willing to rise to fame. Such a great conurbation goes together with joblessness, and all sort of social inequalities that provide inexhaustible inspiration for rap singers who expose those evils and the wild hope of citizens.

As regards the sociolinguistic profile of the interviewees, they affiliate to several ethnic groups and are aged between 15 and 35 years old and most of them started a musical career between 2007 and 2010 corresponding to a critical political period that sparked all sort of protest movements and a particularly active involvement of rappers eager to push the then president out of power. The interviewees are multilingual with a linguistic repertoire made of three languages at least (one or two local languages plus one or two foreign languages acquired during their school years) in different combinations depending on whether the respondent's first language is wolof or another local language. They were interviewed on their songs, the topics they dealt with, language use, the purpose of their choices, their view of the world and all this had to be analysed in order to speculate about their identity.

The Language And Identity Of Rap Music

Identity is complex in so far as it defies any attempt of definition. Even its categorisation into personal versus social or cultural or national or whatever the qualifier do not show any clear-cut; they rather overlap. The lyrics we collected show out that rap music is polyphonic. It bears the features of urban youth language, now standard and now mix with varying registers. We can also

⁸ Zachée Denis Bitjaa Kody. « Théorie de l'emprunt à une langue minoritaire : le cas des emprunts du Français aux langues africaines »

⁹ Cheikh Tidiane Fall wrote the African Synthesis Alphabet (ASA)

note that in rap songs what was theorized as language conflict in sociolinguistic studies turns out to be a partnership. Indeed the use of different languages does not reflect conflicting identities but a symbiosis between a local culture symbolized by the use of a native local language and an internationalisation process trend resorting to an international *lingua franca*. The resulting is a linguistic hybridization that manifests itself in inter-sentential mixes and intra-sentential switches. The following extract is a case in point:

*Là où les opposés s'attirent
Des opposés se tirent
Parfois au plus profond et sombre de nous brille le saphir
L'homme se mesure à:
Qui a le plus long, la plus grosse, le plus raide
Et qui (***)
Yàlla ñi mu bëgg lay jël, lu tax ñun ñu des fi?
Adduna lëndëm, jaxasoo bakkaar yi gën di fees fii.¹⁰
(Biz'art featuring Keiam – Opposite)*

This text is a case of code-switching (French/Wolof) which overall content displays the author's preoccupation about multiculturalism which ought to be a source of richness but has rather become a source of conflict with male chauvinism overriding moral standards. It also acknowledges that man is a mix of good and evil but right now it is the evil side that overwhelms. The shift to Wolof (the passage in bold characters) marks a step into religion to further support how evil life has become. The use of English to deal with the theme of multiculturalism which is in the scope of globalization is not entirely fortuitous. Indeed English as an international language symbolizes openness, the bridge that brings together people from different linguistic backgrounds. Many analysts interpret the artist's use of international languages as a mere will to spread the message worldwide. With such a restrictive approach, they miss the crucial fact that beyond the message it encodes, language is an identity marker that speakers use in different ways to overtly or covertly reflect an image of them different from the one on the open shelf. Even though rap music originates from the US, its importation in Senegal went along with a domestication process of the style, the rhythm, language, sparing but the message. Its use in rap music by the Senegalese youth should not be seen as artists' identification with English but with a mainstream culture released from territoriality.

*Gëmuma ne mbëgel dina yendu fi haine di fanaan
Kon sudoon le cas est-ce que Ibliis du dem ci trônu god am fa ay fan
Mbëgel-a yomb-a wax mais est-ce que ñu ngi koy jêfe
Passion ci li ngay def est-ce que mu ngi def effet
Parler de passion me ramène à mes années de school
Où je faisais le choix entre Pac, Big D et mes cours*

¹⁰ *While Opposites are supposed to attract
They actually fire at each other
Sometimes in the dark depths of our being glimpse light
Man's pride lays with the length, the size, and the stiffness of his (***)
God takes those who are blessed, so we'd better worry why we are still alive
Life is dirty and hard and we live in sin. [My translation]*

*Il y a des fanatiques et d'autres sont des pessimists
Ils auront le cran de te dire qu'il n'y a pas d'avenir avec une vie d'artiste.¹¹*

Contrary to Biz'art featuring Keiam who speak very highly of diversity as a source of richness in the lyrics "Opposite", in *Lu dëgguwul* (Jsideb, 2015), the songwriter draws incompatible dynamics that are rather exclusive. The dichotomies they recall are love and hate, good and evil, words and actions, pessimism and optimism, music as a personal blossoming and school as a societal institution etc. The society portrayed here is a one that needs to be purged from its evil side. Besides, there is a display of what could be called the ideal society which values love, respect, hard work and support of the individual as strong identity markers. These universal values and their Senegalese matrix are in continuous change, shifting to comply with individual and collective consciousness of the changing dynamics in every aspect of people's existence. As Louis Jacques Dorais puts it,

*Identity is not static; it is a dynamic process which is only appearent when acted out.
The acting of identity refers to the way we behave in order to show who we are when
we interact with human and non-human elements of our environment. It is also the
way people and things react to our behaviour.¹²*

Still about language and identity, code-switching and code-mixing as communication or compensatory strategies in lyrics derive from the construction of horizontal and vertical bilingualisms¹³, all of which are expressions of cross-bred identities. Indeed, if we focus on the linguistic repertoire of rap singers and songwriters, we can observe that the bilingual competences are built on languages of the same social political status on the one hand and on languages with differentiated social political status. Whatever the case, language choice displays different motivations, now communicational, now religious and even promotional. So far, the example quoted reflect bilingual repertoires highlighting a close partnership between Wolof, the demographically majority language in Senegal and French, the statutory majority language. The Senegalese culture nests with the arab-muslim culture. The symbols of the latter are Arabic and sufi brotherhoods with their leaders. In rap lyrics, there is what has been termed "*rap predicateur*" or "preaching rap" which went from a new trend into an entire set of themes when the pioneers gained followers. However, the fact of having different trends in this style makes it difficult to generalize its identity nature. Indeed, while some are releasing glorifying lyrics dedicated to figures they consider religious role models for their deeds, some others are rather

¹¹ I don't believe that love and hate can cohabit
If that was possible Satan would want to share God's throne
*It is easy to speak of love but do we only mean it
Does the passion we declare produce the expected effects
Speaking about passion reminds me of my school years
When I could choose between [2]Pac, Big D and my classes
There are those who are fanatic and those who are pessimistic
Those who dare to tell you that there is no hope in an artist life [My translation]*

¹² Louis Jacques Dorais. « La construction de l'identité » p.2.

¹³ Louis Jean Calvet "La diversité linguistique : quels enjeux pour la francophonie ? » <http://www2.lpl-aix.fr/~fulltext/2674.pdf>

disparaging, releasing critical lyrics on the sociocultural positioning of such religious figures. This is what Makhtar Le Cagoulard, (2009) cited by Abdoulaye Niang¹⁴

Ainsi, tout comme le rap en général qui renferme des tendances internes et qui l'englobe, le rap prédicateur recèle des visions différentes à propos du traitement que le MC peut faire de la thématique religieuse : chanter les louanges d'un guide religieux (le serin) pour le rappeur disciple, ou l'attaquer lorsqu'il se présenterait comme un prédateur pour le peuple, que ce marabout s'associe à un politicien ou pas.

This rap preacher is neither intrinsic to Islam nor to the lyrics of Senegalese rap singers, but concerns a larger sectarian spectrum. For instance, in Burkina Faso, it is the identity marker of Bishop MC Claver who is the founder of MCC and who used rap music as a tool for evangelization.¹⁵ In Gabon, Alice Aterianus-Owanga notes an interweaving between faith and religious practices and musical activities which shows out in artists' environments, the names of rap crews and the lyrics. They take the form of critics pointing to the life of preachers, the working of religious institutions and specific behaviors found with believers as a community.¹⁶

It is important to note that speakers' linguistic choices and attitudes are not random occurrences. They are rather oriented to display the embodiment of a given way speakers want to connect to their environment. In the lyrics of Senegalese rap singers, both the set of themes and the linguistic choices are important in the construction of singers' identities which are not static but dynamic. Either in quotations or as mere switches, the choice of Arabic in lyrics says something very interesting concerning the religious identity of singers. The connection between the linguistic choices involving Arabic in the lyrics and the rapper's religious identity is more apparent when the rap group bears a name that unambiguously refers to a religious anchor or to a certain apology for the religious facts.

From the beginning, rap music has always been a weapon directed against social and political abuse. In the African context in general where political leaders are yearning for power, sometimes overriding the expressed will of the people and where *democratic dictatorship* is the rule, communication between the mainstream population and government authorities is often blurred. Indeed politicians are often accused of being directed by self-interest because they never hesitate to play tricks to enter the restrictive circle of high ranking officials and once they are in, they break the link with the people. They do not feel to be accountable to their management and the check and balance that ought to exist between government institutions is often biased by an overconcentration of power in the hands of leaders. In such a context, rap music stands a strong bastion against a predatory policy that would otherwise strip people of their basic rights or divest

¹⁴ Niang, A. « Le rap prédicateur islamique au Sénégal : une musique 'missionnaire' » In *La revue des musiques populaires*. 2014,

¹⁵ Degorce Alice, « Du rap à l'évangélisation. Parole transnationale et parcours de vie d'un bishop de Ouagadougou », *Volume*, 2017/2 (14:1), p. 23-35. DOI : 10.4000/volume.5339. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-volume-2017-2-page-23.htm>

¹⁶ Aterianus-Owanga Alice, « Des diables, des prophètes et des banzis sur les scènes de Libreville : les réemplois religieux des rappeurs du Gabon », *Autrepart*, 2012/1 (N° 60), p. 39-53. DOI : 10.3917/autr.060.0039. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-autrepart-2012-1-page-39.htm>

them of their honor. In this struggle, misappropriation of public money, the termination of contracts benefitting foreign companies, attempts to confiscate power, the selling off of the land etc. are recurring themes explored by artists. In this trend, *Keur gui crew*¹⁷ is the leader, especially with their album *Encyclopedia*, a very sarcastic album where they clash the Senegalese government. As they say, "Even the sponsors stepped back because they were afraid that state authorities would take retaliatory measures against those who are more or less involved in the release of the album"¹⁸.

In these lyrics, the rap singer take on the identity of big brothers watching on you. They stand strongly in defense of minority groups by embodying every aspect of the painful "ordeal" of their existence as minorities. Identity, here, is not a personal quest for any sort of membership to an entity; rather, it is a struggle for the preservation of the building blocks that make up the structure of society as a complex and heterogeneous whole where justice and stability can only be sought in the sociopolitical equilibrium. In this sense, the lyrics go from simple sensitization to revolutionary calls for civil disobedience.

CONCLUSION

Rap music has been studied by several scholars in various aspects related to different fields of research. This study enlarges the scales of those contributions, by digging deep in the crossbreeding of identities expressed in lyrics and which reflects the move of society and the burst of the youth into a global mainstream culture where the local interacts with the global in forms that involve languages, cultures, interpersonal and power relationships. As a result of the analysis, it is clear that code-switching and code-mixing as communication strategies play a significant role in the molding of the crossbred identity that constitutes the new shape of Senegalese youth.

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¹⁷ Keur Gui is an anti-authority rap group. They also co-founded the *Y'en-a-marre* movement which is one of the most virulent anti-authority movement in Senegal.

¹⁸ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/42592/politique/s-n-gal-keur-gui-duo-de-choc/>

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